Decolonial Subversions

Development Meets Theology: Contextualising Non-Western Christian Missions in Africa, Asia and the Middle East

Theology was integral to development practice long before the concept of 'development' was formally coined by US President Truman in his famous speech on the reconstruction of Europe.[1] Western Christian mission was integral to colonial experience, with the Bible accompanying the plough and the spade – in the famous articulation by Thomas Fowell Buxton (1768–1845).[2] This inevitably reflected the metaphysical system in which western societies themselves were embedded during the colonial era, with theology, politics and public culture being intermeshed with one another. In the eighteenth century, revolutions against monarchical authority and movements against the church emerged to change western societies in radical ways. With the subsequent 'rise of reason', religious beliefs were gradually separated from 'knowledge' and were ultimately relegated to the private sphere. Enlightenment thought and the advent of secularism marginalised religious discourse significantly; yet, the influence of religious values and sentiments never fully dissipated. As other writers have meticulously demonstrated, the post-World War II liberal development model never eschewed a faith-informed motivation to 'help' those perceived as 'underdeveloped'.[3] Development actors and missionary organisations who found themselves needing to disassociate themselves from the morally questionable role that western religious actors had played during colonialism, were compelled to adopt the secular language of development as a strategic alternative.[4] This departure from religious discourse within western thinking and science had broader implications for international scholarship and development given the dominance of Anglophone theory and standards in the sector. As a result of this historical background, development practice marginalised and ignored religious beliefs, failing to recognise how the impact of secularism on the particular histories of western societies had shaped their conceptualisations and engagements with 'religion', and that these

[1] Jörg Haustein and Emma Tomalin, "Religion and Development in Africa and Asia", in Routledge Handbook of Africa–Asia Relations, edited by Pedro Miguel Amakasu Raposo de Medeires Carvalho et al. (London: Routledge, 2017), 76–93.

[2] Thomas Fowell Buxton, The African Slave Trade and Its Remedy (London: John Murray, 1840), 511.

[3] Gilbert Rist, The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith (London: Zed Books, 2014).

[4] Comfort Davis, Ayodele Jegede, Robert Leurs, Adegbenga Sunmola, Ukoha Ikuiwo, "Comparing Religious and Secular NGOs in Nigeria: Are Faith-Based Organisations Distinctive?", Religions and Development Research Programme, Working Paper 56, 2011, www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/government-society/research/rad/working-papers/wp-56.pdf.

conceptualisations and approaches could have less or different relevance to the lived realities of other peoples and geographies.[5]

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, theories of secularisation started to lose ground in western scholarly and public thought.[6] Events such as Khomeini's Iranian Revolution and the wider Islamic resurgence in the Middle East, the rise of Protestant fundamentalism in the US, and the emergence of liberation theology in Latin American revolutions evidenced that religious belief was still potent and now demanded to be recognised as such. In parallel, conceptualisations of 'development' evolved to become more accommodating to faith and spirituality. Amartya Sen's 'Development as Freedom' thesis arguably opened the path to a more people-centred and multi-dimensional conceptualisation of development.[7] This could better accommodate religious understandings of wellbeing and societal development, as well as choices informed by faithfulness, which had previously been almost entirely ignored.[8] With the advent of the new millennium and the 'turn to religion', multilateral organisations and influential development players, such as the United Nations and the World Bank, started to invest more in faith-based actors and organisations (FBOs), whom they now portrayed as being instrumental and useful for community development.[9] At this time, scholars of development became preoccupied with defining and typologising FBOs and comparing their effectiveness to secular non-governmental organisations (NGOs).[10] In this debate, different scholars have defined FBOs in different ways, with a provisional agreement being reached that the category is not without important limitations.[11] Some of the problems that have been identified with the category itself are that it projects western understandings of 'faith', homogenises faith-related actors and obscures the diverse ways in which they operate, paying insufficient attention to the varying theological premises that drive these different actors'

[5] The analysis does not claim that only western societies experienced secularisation (e.g. a similar departure from religious discourse took place in Russia prior to and after the 1917 Revolution), but rather that the concept of 'religion', which has been foundational to the Anglophone field of religions and development, reflects western societies' particular histories with the subject matter due to their dominance in knowledge production and international development.

[6] Severine Deneulin and Carole Rakodi, "Revisiting Religion: Development Studies Thirty Years on," World Development 39, no. 1(2011): 45–54.

[7] Séverine Deneulin and Masooda Bano, Religion in Development: Rewriting the Secular Script (London: Zed Books, 2009).

[8] Romina Istratii, "Substantiating 'Development': Toward an Epistemology-Sensitive Development as Freedom?" SOAS African Development Forum, 2018, https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/30606/.

[9] Jenny Lunn, "The Role of Religion, Spirituality and Faith in Development: a Critical Theory Approach", Third World Quarterly, 30, no 5(2009): 937–951.

[10] Emma Tomalin, "Thinking About Faith-Based Organisations in Development: Where Have We Got to and What Next?", Development in Practice 22, no. 5–6 (2012): 689–703.

[11] Katherine Marshall and Richard Marsh, Millennium Challenges for Development and Faith Institutions (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2004); Gerard Clarke, "Faith Matters: Faith-based Organisations, Civil Society and International Development", Journal of International Development 18(2006): 835–848; Gerard Clarke, "Agents of Transformation? Donors, Faith-based Organisations and International Development", Third World Quarterly 28, no. 1(2007): 77–96; Gerard Clarke and Michael Jennings, eds, Development, Civil-Society, and Faith-Based Organisations: Bridging the Sacred and the Secular (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008); Michael Barnett and Janice Gross Stein, eds, Sacred Aid: Faith and Humanitarianism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

approaches within local communities.[12] On the other hand, it has been argued that the distinction between FBOs and NGOs itself projects western understandings of 'religion' and its functions by remaining grounded in an implicit religious/secular dichotomy.[13] As some scholars have observed, donors seem to have favoured FBOs "that express their faith identity in passive ways", in contrast to FBOs that might be associated with 'confessionalist' approaches, combining development with evangelism.[14]

These tendencies should evidence that the development sector has largely remained imbricated in nineteenth century modernity and its intellectual product 'religion'. As other writers have noted, the western epistemological tendency to demarcate spheres of human existence into binary categories, such as secular and religious, public and private, or reason and faith has persisted.[15] Development discourse and practice has generally lacked an understanding of religious worldviews as being by their very nature comprehensive knowledge- and value-systems that are embodied holistically and multi-dimensionally, penetrating most spheres of life and informing human rationalisations and behaviour in complex ways. Moreover, reflecting their ethnocentric origins and underpinnings, faith actors' existing conceptualisations have integrated missionary activity only tangentially, or in ways that have been disproportionately informed by Roman Catholic and Protestant mission experience formed in the context of the colonial and post-colonial history of Africa and Asia. Hence, as one scholar has observed, missionary work has tended to be identified with the more extreme subgroup of FBOs and to be described almost by default as 'proselytist'.[16] Such conceptualisations of missions and development present missionary activity in essentialist terms, implying that development is employed solely or necessarily as a means of proselytising.

These presuppositions and tendencies render the current frameworks for analysing the role of faith in development misguiding and inadequate, especially in the context of efforts to understand Eastern Orthodox Christian traditions in the East, and the five 'Oriental Orthodox' Churches historically based in Africa and Asia; the latter include the Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Coptic, Indian Orthodox, and Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox *Täwahədo* Churches. These churches originate in apostolic activity that extended from the Levant to Asia and Europe, developing distinct theologies. In the fifth century, separations among churches in the East occurred due to theological and political matters,

[12] Julia Berger, "Religious Nongovernmental Organisations: An Exploratory Analysis", Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations 14, no. 1(2003): 15–39.

[13] Tomalin, "Thinking About Faith-Based Organisations in Development."

[14] Tomalin, "Thinking About Faith-Based Organisations in Development", 695.

[15] Carole Rakodi, "Inspirational, Inhibiting, Institutionalised: Exploring the Links between Religion and Development", Religions and Development Research Programme, Working Paper 66, 2011, www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/government-society/research/rad/working-papers/wp-66.pdf

[16] Andrea Paras, "Between Missions and Development: Christian NGOs in the Canadian development sector", Canadian Journal of Development Studies 35, no. 3(2014): 440.

despite having a common origin.[17] On the other hand, a final schism between the Western and Eastern Roman Churches in the eleventh century separated these geographies, fostering different religious histories and theological thought. The development sector still lacks a substantive awareness of and engagement with different ecclesiastical and exegetical traditions under the understanding that theology, as vernacularly experienced by each church, will fundamentally influence how missionaries and other faith actors engage with local communities, including how they respond to indigenous peoples' pre-existing belief systems. Recognising this diversity of Christian theological and exegetical traditions begets the crucial question: how does each faith tradition understand human freedom and the boundaries with evangelism and what implications does this have for their interactions with communities beyond their original geographies?

As opposed to Roman Catholic and Protestant mission, missionary activity associated with the Eastern Orthodox Churches, notably the Greek and Russian Orthodox, resulted in very different histories of emergence and development in Africa, as well as in Central and South Asia, that reflect both theological and geographical specificities. The mission theology of the Eastern Churches mentioned, while not without controversies and internal debates, contrasts sharply with evangelical approaches known in western Christian colonial experience. For example, in the Greek Orthodox Church, mission activity has been based precisely on a position that opposes proselytisation, reflecting a distinctive Orthodox anthropology and soteriology.[18] Theologically speaking, the ways in which the Orthodox faith is shared must respect the divinely instituted ontological freedom of all individuals to choose whether they wish to receive this Gospel or not.[19] If an individual does not wish to be baptised after hearing about the faith, missionaries cannot insist. This, and other historical parameters in Orthodox majority societies such as Greece and Cyprus, should be considered carefully when attempting to understand the scope and mode of Orthodox missionary activity in Africa.[20] In fact, numerous African Orthodox Churches, such as in the case of Kenya and Uganda, started from the ground on the initiative of African pioneers, despite hesitation from external Orthodox authorities. [21]

[17] These regarded their distinctive positions on Christology, which was the outcome of linguistic and ecclesiastical differences across traditions and politics of affiliation. See, for example, the thorough explanation given in John Romanides, "Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Consultation Leo of Rome's Support of Theodoret, Dioscorus of Alexandria's Support of Eutyches and The Lifting of the Anathemas", Romanity, http://www.romanity.org/htm/ro4enfm.htm.

[18] Peter Heers, "The Missionary Origins of Modern Ecumenism Milestones leading up to 1920", Academic Conference 'The Mission of the Orthodox Church and The World Council of Churches, Athens, 2005.

[19] Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana, Durres and All Albania, "Orthodox Missions: Past, Present and Future", Missions Institute of Orthodox Christianity at Hellenic College Holy Cross, 2015.

[20] Evi Voulgaraki, "Orthodoxy in East Africa beyond Decolonisation", Salt: Crossroads for Religion and Culture 1 (2021); Evangelos Thiani. "Tension of Church Tradition and African Traditional Cultures in the African Orthodox Church of Kenya: Seeking for a Theological Justification for Contextualization", *Salt:* Crossroads for Religion and Culture 1 (2021).

[21] Voulgaraki, "Orthodoxy in East Africa beyond Decolonisation"; Evangelos Thiani, "The Contribution of Daniel William Alexander to the Birth and Growth of Eastern Orthodoxy in East Africa", Journal of African Christian Biography 3, no. 1 (January 2018): 27–38.

The distinct theology of the Eastern Orthodox faith and the implications this has had for its interactions with local communities starts to become evident in Fr Evangelos Thiani's extensive analysis of the African Orthodox Church in Kenya (this issue). As Fr Thiani demonstrates, the church does not separate its *diakonia* (understood as Christian-centred social service in the form of charity, development and philanthropy), from its very *ecclesiologia* (the understanding of what the church is). The church is concerned with the material, spiritual and social welfare of its members and non-members alike due to its fundamental apostolic theology, which understands living the faith as *philanthropia* and ascesis, even as martyrdom, as Fr Thiani mentions. These theological and exegetical premises must be understood by external observers in any effort to analyse the activity of Orthodox Churches, such as the one in Kenya, and their relationships and contributions to local communities.

The same subtle doctrinal premises are reflected in many of the activities of Greek Orthodox NGOs and FBOs (e.g. Orthodox Mission Fraternity, Orthodox Christian Mission Center, *Porefthentes*, Missionary *Syndesmos of St. Cosmas of Aetolia,* Orthodox Africa, My Rafiki, Paradise 4 Kids and *Filantropia*), fostering approaches of engagement with local communities that pay considerable attention to human choice and holistic human needs. One might speak of community engagement models that are more considerate of people's own choices and pre-existing relationships to indigenous lifestyles and beliefs than those described in Anglophone missionary scholarship. This recognition does not deny that the Orthodox Churches in Africa have been affected by tensions and issues of control on the ground, as seen in the case of the church in Uganda.[22] However, these issues are reported to have less to do with theology and more to do with local politics, and the challenges of the indigenisation of local churches due to the presence of complex relationships to external Orthodox Patriarchates, such as the one in Alexandria.

The missionary engagements of the Russian Orthodox Church are more difficult to analyse due to the church's historical embeddedness in efforts of national expansion and the annexation of foreign peoples into the Russian Empire. The expansionist policies of the state notwithstanding, missionary activity should not be hastily identified with state interests or be seen as evidence for outright 'russification', as has been argued by a segment of scholars. Alison Kolosova's analysis of Nikolai Il`minskii's missionary activity (this issue) aims to demonstrate precisely that, describing Il`minskii's motivations and practices as "an entangled mixture of influences from both 'below' and 'above'." As the paper suggests, Il`minskii's background as a teacher of Arabic, Tatar and Islamic theology allowed him to see the need for an approach of imparting Orthodox teachings through "'patterns of thought as close to the mindset of the ordinary people as possible'", which departed from the russificatory views espoused at the state level.[23]

[22] We are not Happy with the Greek Orthodox Leadership, and Tribalism in Uganda, and in Africa. We Need Help' – Ugandan Orthodox Christians', Orthodox Cognate Page, 26 May 2020, https://theorthodoxchurch.info/blog/news/we-are-not-happy-with-the-greek-orthodox-leadership-and-tribalism-in-uganda-and-in-africa-we-need-help-ugandan-orthodox-christians/.

[23] The paper does not explore this, but it is likely that Il`minskii had assimilated lessons from shifts in western missionary approaches, which could be investigated in future studies (Kolosova, email communication, 23 November 2020).

As a result of their immersion in local languages and cultures, it is thought that Russian Orthodox missionaries were in some cases the first to create written forms for indigenous languages, arguably contributing to their preservation, although it is not always made clear whether these reported languages had previously existed in non-Cyrillic scripts[24] For example, Il`minskii, whose work Kolosova analyses in this issue, created the first Cyrillic alphabet for the Tatar language, but there had existed for centuries a written form of Tatar using Arabic script.[25] Other sources report that the first Russian missionaries to reach Alaska not only "cared for the indigenisation and inculturation of faith",[26] but also invested time in learning and preserving local languages, such as the *Inuit*.[27] As a contrast to the 'russification' argument, it is also striking that Russian Orthodox adherents in Russia have no hesitation in venerating indigenous North Americans who achieved with their lives and miracles the status of canonised sainthood, with the case of Matushka Olga Michael being one such example.[28]

As Aleksandrs Dmitrenko notes in his paper (this issue), the translation of religious literature by missionaries and the task of communicating these teachings to local communities has, as a topic, been understudied and merits closer attention. Serge Bolshakoff's account of Russian missionary history suggests that key Russian Orthodox monks, who contributed to evangelising the Russian Empire's newly annexed territories in Central and East Asia, studied and employed indigenous languages to disseminate the message and teachings of the church.[29] Dmitrenko's compilation of historical narratives and testimonies helps, for example, to elucidate the significant role that Archimandrite Gury Karpov and Bishop Innocent Figurovsky had in translating the New Testament into Chinese, identifying collaborations with native speakers that might have contributed to local scholarship in ways that merit more attention.

The Oriental Orthodox Churches and traditions appear to have manifested more limited missionary tendencies, which can be explained by various historical reasons, although many of these spread to peoples and territories beyond their native or original contexts. Examples include the Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwahədo* Church, which spread historically not only beyond Christian Abyssinia, but also outside Ethiopia, such as in Jamaica, or the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church in northern regions of India, which reached communities outside of Kerala. In the twenty-first century, much discussion among Indian Orthodox scholars has revolved around identity-building and 'indigenisation', indicating that the quest for better self-understanding and self-definition is ongoing for this church.[30] Local religious stakeholders have been considering carefully how its message may be extended to non-Christians in India,

[24] Bolshakoff, The Foreign Missions of the Russian Orthodox Church.

[25] Kolosova, email communication, 23 November 2020.

[26] Evi Voulgaraki, "Mission and Politics", Paper presented at the IOTA Conference, Iasi 2–12 January 2019, 4.

[27] Richard L. Dauenhauer, Conflicting Visions in Alaskan Education (Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1997); Michael J. Oleksa, Orthodox Alaska: A Theology of Mission (St Vladimirs Seminary Press, 1992).

[28] Fr John Shimchick, "Matushka Olga Michael: A Helper in Restoring the Work of God's Hands", Orthodox Christianity, 2015, http://orthochristian.com/86554.html.

[29] Serge Bolshakoff, The Foreign Missions of the Russian Orthodox Church (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943).

[30] M.K. Kuriakose, Orthodox Identity in India: Essays in Honour of V.C. Samuel (Bangalore: Rev. Dr. V.C. Samuel 75th Birthday Celebration Committee, 1988).

which could suggest a renewed interest in mission, raising the need for more research in this area.[31] Unfortunately, colleagues from the Indian and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches who had expressed an interest in contributing to this special issue were prevented from doing so by the COVID-19 pandemic and other reasons, which limits the scope of the special issue considerably. It is hoped that these contributions will be added to the special issue as and when submitted in the future.

Such specificities and differentiations reinforce the need to investigate more closely the theological and sociological realities of these indigenous churches, identifying better the factors that have shaped their positions on missionary activity, and the ways in which they have engaged with communities as a result of these theologies. They also beget the need to explore more closely the implications of their activities in local communities, the historical parameters that guided these churches' development in Africa and Asia, and the motivations informing the approaches of affiliated NGOs and FBOs. The fields of mission studies, and religions and development must recognise the unique characteristics of Eastern Churches and traditions and their affiliated organisations, produce scholarship that maps their historical and current missionary activity in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, and explore through people-centred and ethnographic narratives their variable relationships to local communities.

The contributions in this issue provide new and nuanced insights into the influence that the approaches they describe had locally, and how local populations have perceived and responded to them. They help to illuminate the strengths and limitations of these distinct approaches and suggest a more nuanced template through which missionary activity can be related to local development. This knowledge can inform scholarship that is particularly interested in the resourcefulness of faith-based and religious actors in contributing to the alleviation of societal problems, such as gender asymmetries, health epidemics, crime, or other societal issues. A better understanding of how these churches conceptualise their own activity (e.g. *vis-à-vis* state-based understandings of development) and their modes of pursuing these objectives has implications for development policy, both at the international and the local level. For example, increasingly scholars of development and religions interrogate how the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), introduced by the predominantly secular development industry as global development objectives, might account for faith parameters and how they have been engaged by faith-based actors and FBOs.[32] A closer look at non-western Christian activity internationally could take the discipline in new directions, guided by these churches' distinct understandings of human and societal development.

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[31] Romina Istratii, "Orthodox", in Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity Vol. 3: Christianity in South and Central Asia, edited by Kenneth R. Ross and Todd M. Johnson, eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

[32] Séverine Deneulin and Augusto Zampini-Davies, "How the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can Engage with Religion", LSE Religion and Global Society, 2016; Emma Tomalin, Joerg Haustein and Shabaana Kidy, "Religion and the Sustainable Development Goals", Cambridge Institute on Religion and International Studies, 2018; Romina Istratii, "Harnessing Local Knowledge for Addressing Gender-related Societal Issues: A New Model of Sustainable Development in Religious Communities?", LSE Religion and Global Society, 2018.